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FAN Mothers in Our Fragile Social Network against Climate Change

This email chain conversation between eight mother-artist activists written over a period of one year between January 2018 and January 2019 reflects our various family lives and attitudes to climate change at that time. The authors identify as belonging to the Family Activist Network and, consequently, to the environmental movement in the age of the Anthropocene. The piece addresses: (1) the many contradictions, paradoxes, hypocrisies, and incongruences inherent in trying to be mother-artist activists; (2) feminist solidarity; (3) questioning if it is possible to reconcile activism with maternity, under what circumstances, and according to what models of activist/maternal practice; (4) intergenerational injustice; (5) the question of acting or not acting; (6) the question of paying attention—noticing how you live and how you create the conditions for another human to live; (7) other life—other humans, nonhumans, and the earth; and (8) the spectacle of mothers and children in protest—the whole performance of mothering in the public realm, at rallies, marches, and art-activist events.

FAN (the Family Activist Network) was founded in 2014 to consider family life and climate change through a variety of art-activist formats. FAN existed between 2014 and 2019 and included academics, activists, actors, artists, architects, babies, cultural workers, dreamers, parents, playwrights, school children, and toddlers. They were Anna, Clare, Corin, Edward, Ella, Fionn, Gabriel, Gary, Hamish, Hope, Innes, James, Jennifer, Jodie, Jude, Laylah, Lawrence, Leah, Leo, Lena, Mahmood, Mala, Martha, Max, Neal, Oisín, Paula, Pete, Roma, Ruby, Sam, Sandy, Sarah, Sid, Susi, Tom, Valerie, and Zoë. Some members were engaged in their own arts collectives (a place of their own, METIS, Migrant Artists Mutual Aid, Search Party, The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, and Townley & Bradby), and

others worked independently. All sought to imagine and create another possible world with social and ecological justice at its core. Since 2015, FAN has met on an average of two times a year at demonstrations and working/activist holidays. What follows is an email correspondence by FAN mothers, which was created over a period of one year between January 2018 and January 2019. We wrote in between school runs and nursery drop offs, over breakfast, before work, after studying, and in the middle of the night.

Lena: How about we, FAN mothers, submit something together—a reflection on what it means to mother and be a part of FAN, to belong to our fragile social movement/network against climate change? In what ways does FAN enable a different kind of mothering?

Leah: I wonder whether we can use this form (i.e., of the group email chain) as a way to present the contribution? It seems quite key to the organizational infrastructure of FAN and also speaks (to me anyway) of the practical and spatial realities of parenting (perhaps mothering?)—a loose network of people, a conversation across multiple sites, interrupted.

I'm also curious about how and whether it is possible to reconcile activism with maternity, under what circumstances, and according to what models of activist/maternal practice?

Clare: I wrote a five-minute play called “The Blue Puzzle,” and I wrote a monologue for “A Mother” (Duffy). Climate Change Action Theatre commissions fifty playwrights from every continent biannually to write a five-minute play about global warming. The plays are put on all around the world. They particularly wanted us to write something hopeful for the last one. It forced me to try to think about a positive future for my child, even if all the terrible predictions come true.

Paula: So, maybe something about the many contradictions, paradoxes, hypocrisies, and incongruences inherent in trying to be a mother-artist and sometimes activist. How none of these titles fit comfortably at any one time. The perpetual failing and striving. I have four children, which many deem problematic, especially in the face of catastrophic climate change and discussions of population growth and consumption and so on, although this is a hugely complex terrain. For example, population control arguments are often racist, serving anti-immigration agendas at the same time individualizing responsibility, assigning the blame for climate change on mothers and their reproductive capacities. The children are here, and I am their mother. It's no use just sitting back and worrying about it.

Engaging in maternal art activism (from my highly privileged position)

with small children has allowed me to pay attention, to really notice how I live, to consider the choices I make through creating the conditions for another human to live and how this connects me to other humans, but also to nonhumans and the earth. Perhaps there is something to be said for how all caring work (in the broadest sense, not confined to biological relations) might open up access to paying attention to lives beyond the familial, towards thinking about other kinships and towards taking responsibility for others. I think the intrauterine is also important to mention here—in terms of how the intrauterine process, shared by all humans, of being created with another (the mother) allow postbirth humans to think about connections to others. How might this be transformative? Or how might it provide a frame to re-think how we relate and take responsibility for others?

I am also thinking about the whole issue of the ethics of maternal art activism. For example, people often ask if my children want to be involved. This came up when going to COP21 in Paris. Following a year of slow correspondence, this was FAN's first meetup and action together. Four weeks before we planned to travel together to Paris, there was a large-scale attack in Paris across three sites. What followed was a complex set of concerns and issues to consider, which each family responded to differently.

Zoë: I'm in the midst of attempting to complete multiple administrative tasks to clear the decks (ha!) for creative work. I've been saving up looking at the maternal activist material. I'll have a look now.

Jennifer: While my participation with FAN is always somewhat on the very fringes, my experience of feminist solidarity and mothering through our collaborations and friendship has been life changing and sustaining in my work as an artist and activist.

Paula: To echo what Jen has just written—the huge amount of support and solidarity to be had by coming together collectively with all our differences and similarities. There have been so many amazing interactions. I always remember how much Anna notices and cares for pregnant FAN mothers and those breastfeeding, even while mothering her own three daughters. She would always hang back and offer her maternal wisdom and support. Another form of paying attention from the knowing position of understanding how hard it is to act when you are creating life, when you are nourishing new life.

Anna: There's something very powerful about being part of a supportive group. I feel it gives me foundation and strength to go out and take part in other stuff that I would normally shy away from.

Lena: I will try to create a proposal. I think we can all agree that we are willing to submit a personal/creative response (via the e-mail chain method that Leah proposed) on what it means to mother right here/now in the age of Anthropocene, and to express feminist solidarity through belonging to FAN. I will e-mail over the weekend with the proposal, and if anyone manages to edit/comment, great—if not, no worries. If anyone suddenly gets some time/energy to write it all up, by all means do! I will try to pull it together, as I believe this is a good way to get us focused and thinking/writing together.

Clare: We're all doing poorly today (runny noses and temperatures). I'm pretending to Hamish that I'm opening the computer, so we can watch an after-lunch film, but I'm secretly communicating with you, too.

Proposal: This collection will allow us to reflect on our various family lives and attitudes to climate change, on belonging to FAN, and, consequently, to the environmental movement in the age of the Anthropocene. We plan to address: (1) the many contradictions, paradoxes, hypocrisies, and incongruences inherent trying to be mother-artist activists; (2) feminist solidarity; (3) questioning if it is possible to reconcile activism with maternity, under what circumstances, and according to what models of activist/maternal practice; (4) intergenerational injustice; (5) the question of acting or not acting; (6) the question of paying attention—noticing how you live and how you create the conditions for another human to live; (7) Other life—other humans, nonhumans, and the earth; and (8) the spectacle of mothers and children in protest—the whole performance of mothering in the public realm, at rallies, marches, and art-activist events.

Leah: I want to share an anecdote as a starting point/provocation. When we had our second child, we decided to switch to washable nappies. We did this as a practical attempt to confront the environmental impact of parenting. We didn't really consider it as a viable option with our first but felt guilty about the amount of waste we were producing, and I was thinking about environment and parenting more because of our participation in FAN. I had discovered that biodegradable nappies don't degrade in landfill, so I stocked up on Terry towels, covers, all-in-one washables, the works. It wasn't cheap. We used them loads to begin with, but the sheer weight of washing destroyed our washing machine. We had prevented nappy waste going in the landfill, but we had totalled a massive, plastic-armoured machine in the process.

There was also the tedious labour involved in all the washing. When my husband was away for work, I felt like the stereotype of the 1950s housewife. In the end, maybe it was pointless because the difference I was making as an anxious, middle-class woman is negligible when set against the massive weight

of all of society's piss-soaked nappies and the industrial waste and greenhouse gases they produce that contribute to climate change. Norah MacKendrick has researched the phenomenon in which women, and particularly mothers, take on the responsibility for limiting toxic exposure through what she terms, "precautionary consumption." Writing in the context of Canada, she highlights the underlying fallacy of precautionary consumption. It overlooks the pervasiveness of toxics. MacKendrick cautions against diverting attention from structural and industrial accountability for climate change to individual consumers—particularly women (and mothers)—in ways that reproduce normative ideas of the good mother.

What's the point of me washing loads of shitty nappies when disposables are the only option for so many people? I'm thinking especially of the rising numbers of families in insecure accommodation in my local area of Newham, who don't have ready access to laundry facilities or drying space. Is it enough to do what I can to reduce my consumption and production of waste, even if that means performing motherhood in ways that risk alienating my neighbours? Does living sustainably necessarily mean forfeiting convenience? Is convenience really that great if it means your participation in an unsustainable system of endless consumption, or might the time I used washing nappies have been given over to modes of activist practice, such as artmaking? Is there a middle ground? I don't know, but we switched back to disposables for the sake of our new washing machine and our sanity.

Jodie: From nappies to prams, when we were trying to decide whether we should go to Paris or not, someone wrote how they wouldn't want to be trying to get away from another attack or an angry police officer if they had their baby with them strapped in the pram. It was an image that stuck in my head—the desperate attempt to unclip those fiddly pram straps, the pram wheels on lock, the weight of it, and all the stuff crammed in underneath and on top while you are trying to run, move, get somewhere, the encumbered mother fleeing in panic while trying to undo the Velcro rain cover.

Sometimes I cut across the park to save time. The wheels are heavy in the mud, and I push and I sweat across the grass just to drop the baby at nursery and get to work quicker. It's like an uphill slog—slow, heavy, while everyone else around me seems to be skipping. Today, the grass has been cut. It's wet, and I can smell the earth. In the co-op, I see the staff in a huddle. I hear them say: "That lady that just came in with the pram." Then I see it while I'm in the queue—grass. A trail around the whole shop. So much of it, in between the cheese and the milk and the baked beans. The white floor is marked by the greenest grass, tracing my pathway around the convenience food, and the carrots are wrapped in plastic. I try to pretend it's another mother, but the wheels of the pram are coated in it. The staff get out the mops and the brooms.

They are not here to clean, and they are angry. I'm embarrassed. I pay and leave as quickly as I can. On the way to nursery, I keep thinking about what a great way it would be to protest, to cover the wheels in something—earth, grass, oil, petrol, paint. About mothers everywhere pushing prams that leave trails in a daily attempt to disrupt, dissent, make trouble, all while their babies sleep and snuggle and graze on snacks.

Clare: Jodie, I think it was me who couldn't stop imagining what it would be like to run with Hamish in his buggy if there was a panic in a crowd in Paris. In the days immediately after the attack on the November 13, I saw video clips of people panicking in Paris, often simply because of loud noises. I was really frightened by their fear. Those attacks changed the collective assessment on the street of what could happen and of what was likely to happen. This makes me think about the mental impacts of climate change and our assessment of what can happen. We're not able to imagine what it would look like at street level and what it would mean. It is already happening, but where it's happening is too far away for us to panic or change. Our challenge is to find a way to bring it to our buggies—to make it apparent in our everyday lives.

You've made me think about buggies as "hyperobjects" in such a brilliant way—an item that is "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 1). I have loved my current buggy, but it is now very old and battered. A second-hand, ex-display, Mama and Papa's Armadillo that would have cost £300 but only cost £60 because of a super-generous friend. Hamish has been so happy in it. When we were staying at a friend's house and he felt homesick, he crawled into its familiarity for a quiet moment of comfort. It also allowed him to sleep at home, as I could rock him in it. I didn't have to push it around the Meadows every day, which is what I did with the previous tank of a "travel system," which was what it was actually called! We had to keep the travel system in our car because it was too heavy and difficult to haul up the stairs to our flat, especially as I was on my own with Hamish most of the time for the first year. My partner ran a shop sixty hours a week!

God, my arms ache just thinking about the desperate circling of the Meadows in the rain, trying to get him to nap in the afternoon. I always remember it as raining and the way, even in the best rainwear, eventually the drips found their way through at the zips, joins, and hood. The way they started to run around my neck and down my back. How brutal exhaustion transformed into a sodden, hysterical consumption of chocolate, often followed with a barely controlled weep in the back room of my partner's shop before going home to feed him again. Ahh.

It was having Hamish and a row that I had with my mother about her climate change scepticism (denial) that brought me to FAN. The letter I wrote

to you that year of his birth was a milestone for me. It was a moment when I joined the dots between feeding him with my body, my mother feeding me, and the world supporting us all. I had just read *Hyperobjects* by Timothy Morton and was just starting to own up to my own denial about denial. After all, I brought Hamish into a world that I think might die before the end of his lifetime due to the ecological cost of capitalism. But I don't really think that because if I did, I wouldn't have had Hamish. Would I? I can't help but be optimistic. "The Blue Puzzle," which I wrote for Climate Change Theatre Action, ends with a super optimistic idea: There will be solutions, and they won't only save our planet but save our lonely, oily-selves as well.

I am optimistic that the solutions will involve us all being kinder, less individualistic, and less anthropocentric overall. We'll need to share our resources more and make more from less, which will require more cooperation with more people, including those you may not like. I hope that letting go of some of the value we invest in "me-ness" will make us kinder and less selfish. I think it's a great idea to use buggies to draw some new lines across the everyday routes of our denials and our ways of hiding climate change from ourselves. Let's do it.

Anna: Activism and political discussion are not the right path for me to engage with global change. I have found I can work more effectively behind the scenes by connecting with spiritual realms and helping to direct light where it is needed—what I call "light work."

I have been building a daily practice of meditation and connection. Sitting on a chair with feet on the ground, I call Guardian and Guides to draw closer:

"Creator, Angel, guides and unseen worlds,
Please help me to do this work for the highest good,
And always in the love and light."

My Guardian is just above my left shoulder; my Guides are in front of me.



Light Children by Anna Townley (2018)

Through doing this light work, I have come to understand that light can grow if nurtured. Working with your immediate surroundings—yourself, those around you and others who come towards you—will build light that begins to radiate out and join a network of light and energy across the globe.

This work, both subtle and deep, has given me a different perspective on global and domestic politics, climate change, and humanity in general. I feel more empowered and more positive that change is possible. Expressing some of what I see and receive during meditation through drawings and paintings is a way to deepen my understanding of light work.

Jennifer: I am trapped currently between the different ways that I am writing and also a certain amount of darkness around the current rise of the far right. I am spending too much time thinking about religiously framed violence, what causes it, and what makes people willing to risk their life for what they feel to be a sacred value.

But I am here at the fringes of FAN!

Zoë: Climate change has started to suffuse my six-year-old son's imaginary play. He bowls along the street inventing things to combat and generally pretends he is an avatar in a video game a lot of the time. This has now extended to him inventing artificial sharks to eat the plastic in the oceans (with the strain of bacteria that can eat plastic) or a carbon-dioxide sucking-up machine that is going to go around and "destroy" (his word) all the power stations. For him, it is all heroes and villains, a zero-sum game, us versus them. In my mind, this replicates competitive (often masculine) identity production—as though destruction were all that was needed to solve whatever the problem might be. Transformation does, of course, involve the ending of things, but I am uncomfortable with my son's emphasis on destruction because it isn't in and of itself generative. It is so much easier to focus on the ending of things than it is to imagine the beginning of new things—yet that's what we so urgently need.

I went to a conference—Under Her Eye: Women and Climate Change—on June 1 2018. The UN chief negotiator for the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, Christiana Figueres, gave a keynote. One of her first actions when she started in 2010 was to insist such words as "fight," "battle," and "combat" were replaced with such words as "address" and "respond to."

Moving away from the language of war enabled her to start to shift the debate beyond antagonism and blame to a future-orientated invitation to come to a decision on what is to be done. It was part of her ideology of "emergent leadership" (in contrast to "directional leadership"). It involves a practice of listening before imposing and recognizing historic harm (and the need for reparation) while pushing forwards for fundamental change. Although the Paris Agreement, of course, does not go nearly far enough, the achievement of bringing almost every country in the world to agreement, even when not legally binding—one that includes the recognition that 1.5 degrees is critical to the survival of peoples and environment—is astonishing in the current political (and planetary) climate. What needs continued attack is the inaction of governments and all complicities and allowances granted to the fossil fuel industries. However, climate change itself is not something you can run at waving a sword. Be alert to human impacts and their ramifications, explore and live the complexities of how we can contribute to altering our fossil fuel dependent culture's ruinous relationship with nature, and make the worlds we want to live in. Donna J. Haraway talks of "staying with the trouble" (4). I think that's what we are doing here, in the context of the maternal—living with the contradictions, making peace with what often gets described as hypocritical. That is, the painful gap between how we would like to be able to do things with and for our children in relation to their environment and

what feels possible in the UK context at present.

I think of the vocabulary for dealing with the threat that my six- and two-year-old boys are growing up with. There are a couple of cartoons that are a bit more discovery orientated, but they are still largely built around the idea of predator, risk, and hero. Our children are being rehearsed by the culture for the survivalist narrative, of surviving as winning, and winner takes all.

I feel a little helpless, having let this violent, battle-led world into his mental space already. I've been far too slack, I think, about his cultural environment. I've not thought enough about the violence in the hero narratives, which are everywhere. But you cannot keep children completely isolated from the experiences of their peers. Instead, I am attempting to cultivate in him a critical awareness of what is going on in these narratives.

But we also need to model a different narrative, a different kind of network of responsibility and collaboration—a different sense of self. The UN conference did suggest that some of that might come from traits I associate with mothering: listening, non-judgement, acceptance of the situation and then moving on to find new solutions, clarity, and integrity—what Figueres called “emergent” rather than “directional” leadership.

A glimmer of hope: My son is also planning with a friend to help endangered animals. The plan is to raise money to buy food for the animals; it is something they've come up with themselves (in the school playground). Although, once again, there's the challenge of working out how to support him—how to channel the energy without taking over their project and how to enable him to see his plan through without dampening it by pointing out its child's-eye-view impracticalities

But what all this comes down to is how climate conversations are an everyday part of our lives, which I am grateful to FAN for, because it makes it part of his life. He will have always had the challenges we are facing in his sphere of attention rather than something that comes upon him with a terrible shock. It is also developing his political imagination.

Paula: It was so heartening to see the UN conference take place last week in London. The role of women in addressing climate change is crucial at all levels. For me, when mothering small children, any form of what might be considered “activism” happens in mostly small ways as part of everyday mothering and mostly in the domestic realm. In those mundane, repetitious, and magical moments of parenting, I think there can be moments of transformation for the mother, or other parent and child—like the everyday encounters shared in previous emails, the caring for children, and through the decisions we make on a daily basis. These might constitute microactions. It might be that these encounters afford opportunities for us to think and talk about, for example, capitalism or consumerism.

Becoming vegan has been an important example of everyday activism in our entangled lives. Central to this process of becoming vegan is opening up to more expanded thinking about human and more than human relations, about the dominance of human life and the tyranny of human exceptionalism, and about using creative ways to consider a possible world where species coexist differently.

In recognition of the importance of the everyday in terms of this idea of family activism, my partner and four children set up the art collective: a place of their own.¹ Through the collective, we have engaged in a range of art encounters, such as occupying empty buildings, performing on the UK border with the Irish Republic, creating a performance about human-nonhuman entanglements, and becoming members of FAN. We try to get to grips—in a messy, entangled and embodied way—with what it means to live in ways that resist human exceptionalism. In doing so, the hope is that our children discover that this is an option for their futures. For example, we went to La ZAD last year in Nantes.² These were moments of doing everyday things differently.

There is another layer that I think is important and weaves through all our life (living together, the art practice, and so on). That is the importance of the aforementioned intrauterine. My entry point to this thinking is the feminist theorist and artist Bracha Ettinger and her matrixial theory, which she explains in *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Through a feminist and psychoanalytical lens, and as an artist, Ettinger explores the significance of the intrauterine for all postnatal human and nonhuman relations. Specifically, the intrauterine encounter during late pregnancy between the mother and the unborn fetus as having a lasting legacy that can be later accessed (Ettinger, *The Matrixial* 219) and how tuning into this original encounter might help us to foster what Ettinger and others refer to as “response-ability” for others (Ettinger, “Fragilization”).

This thinking has been a great influence on how I have come to think of the maternal—the experience of mothering, but more broadly the maternal-feminine. This theory helped me to make sense of what the maternal-feminine does and what it could do—not only in terms of carrying another or caring for my own children, but in how to rethink what it means to be human by thinking with the intrauterine. I guess I am interested in the radical potentiality of the maternal-feminine in this expanded sense, as a set of concerns from which to think differently, such as providing access to alternative modes of living and connecting with others, which is so urgently needed.

Jodie: I’ve been thinking a lot about risk and distraction.

Last week, Jude dropped a can of chickpeas on his foot. It completely ripped off his toenail. Pete took him to the hospital and waited hours and hours to

have his foot X-rayed to see if it was broken (it wasn't). I stayed at home and mopped up the blood. It was sort of my fault because I left him downstairs while Pete was distracted cooking. I went upstairs to put the washing away from a trip we had been on. It was sort of my fault because I lazily put the tins on a very low shelf because we bought too much stuff from the shop, and the cupboards were already full of half opened stuff. It was sort of my fault because I'm his mum.

After telling my mum about the toe, she remarked that he seems accident prone, always in the wars. I said yes, although a part of me wondered if my parenting is just a bit worse third time around. We haven't got a stair gate; we haven't got those little covers that go in the plug sockets, and I'm always a bit too tired, distracted, busy. He can manage... yikes.

Even as I began to write this, I found him under a fallen chair, in between the vacuum cleaner and a fallen scooter. Crying, but not really crying. He has no understanding of what is dangerous; he is wild. He loves to bounce and throw himself around on the trampoline. The older two have ripped down all of the netting on the sides. They hang off it like chimpanzees. The little one's in the middle, constantly on the edge of it, just about to fall out, over the edge. I remember when Ruby was in the hospital with a broken arm. The rows of beds with children with broken limbs, from either a trampoline or a bouncy castle—it seemed comical. I remembered how lucky they are to be in hospital beds due to bouncy fun and not some other unimaginable horror. The baby thinks it's funny when I shout and run to save him. It drives him wilder. He likes to fall right near the edge now. To see my panic, to delight in it. It's easier to give him what he wants, to let him go on there.

My mother has given me bad cholesterol; it's inherited. The sticky kind. I might have given it to my children. All without knowing. They will need to be tested when they are teenagers, the doctor says. I have more risk of having a heart attack or a stroke. Where are the dangerous things? Inside us, already living in our bodies? In the kitchen cupboard? In the garden? How do we protect them from the inescapable, hero narratives dominating children's TV programs? How do we protect them from rising floods and electric storms and extreme heat? How do we protect them?

I don't fully understand the medical terminology from the doctor. The baby speaks in grunts and mumbles, but I understand him fully. I feel like his interpreter. A slight difference in pitch or tone tells me exactly what he wants and needs. Last week, I was distracted from writing this because I was in the studio working on our new show about climate change, *Storm*. While we were working, the baby slipped on some water. That night, I dreamt the baby died when I wasn't looking. I woke in the night crying. That hasn't happened for a long time. We've been reading Tim Morton. The end of the world has already happened, he says (Morton, *Being*). I wasn't listening to the talk we, as FAN,

had in Scotland about James Watt and the start of the Anthropocene. I was distracted by my son's sick bug. I regret it now.

The baby wants a real fork, not a plastic one. He wants to eat his food himself with a big, spiky, metal, sharp fork, and if he doesn't get it, he will cry. I give in. I'm tired. I hope he doesn't lose an eye.

The rabbit died shortly after the baby's birth. The plants from Paris are nearly dead. The nonhuman things are the worst looked after in our house. Jude destroys the plants in the garden. He tramples over the sprouting weeds and planted flowers, unaware.

Leah: This is not so much an answer to the thread but to ease any guilt. Those electric socket covers are supposed to be more dangerous than not using anything, as UK sockets have the third prong for safety. Plus, they're plastic. Double win for lackadaisical parenting! Hope Jude's toenail grows back fast.

Zoë: I think how much they fall about, or run away, is down to character, not parenting. But I recognize what you describe. It does feel all about scale—how near or far to think, look, and feel. I'd love to come and see your piece. I'm trying to get to grips with writing for mine. It is so difficult. There are so many barriers, in my mind as well as in terms of time, and so on.

Jodie: Yes, it's a weird time to be alive. It all sort of feels really funny and really sad to me. I like Morton's description of this feeling as "uncanny" and "weird." Inside the "hyperobject," you are aware of it but are unable to really see it or imagine it. Yet we are always aware of it in everything we now do: getting in the car, eating a cucumber wrapped in plastic, turning the light off, chatting about the weather. Everything changed by our knowledge of climate change. We can't unknow it, can't do anything about it. Stuck. And everything is interconnected, everything.

Clare: For a moment yesterday, on the train, on the way to the preview of *The Reason I Jump* at the National Theatre of Scotland in Glasgow, that image of the drowned Syrian refugee toddler on the Turkish beach came into my head. I realized I was on the edge of howling. I was able to mentally walk back from the image, to creep back up that beach, turn the other way, and stop myself seeing that little body. But I know it's there. All day today, I've been aware of that body. Smaller than Hamish's body, but when I first saw it, it was exactly the same as his would have been if it had been him.

I'm too busy to put Hamish to bed for two nights this week, which is fine, isn't it? Of course it is. I have to be able to work. I have to pay for the food, bed, home, and everything. But the image of that toddler makes me think about never being able to put him to bed again.

Everything is connected.

In *The Reason I Jump*, you are told by a young nonverbal autistic boy to enter the labyrinth with a question. I'm going tonight again. So what question shall I ask?

Anna: I just saw two wrens in the garden.

Clare: On a happier note, Hamish can wee standing up this week. Does being a gay mum make you worry about this more?

Jodie: Anna, I just had to Google “wren” to see a picture. Britain’s most common breeding bird, but their small size and reliance on insects means they perish easily during prolonged periods of cold weather. A common breeder.

Anna: Eight years of medicines, toiletries, and health supplements:



Eight Years of Medicines, Toiletries and Health Products by Anna Townley (2018)

Lena: This is getting too much. Maternal activism overwhelms. The email threads. The sheer number of people, bodies, exchanges, mothers, and children involved. This is spilling beyond me. Climate change escapes each time. I can't quite grasp it. I try. I speak up in difficult situations, in political meetings. I bring it forwards into the public space of discussion. I open it up. People get

reminded of the existential threat. Then we move onto something else. Some other pressing problem—austerity, poverty, public services cuts knocking upon our doors.

I regret saying I will compile all these emails. I regret saying I will engage in the edit. The clean up feels like something beyond me. I have no time. There's no clean energy. There's lack of resources and time. If only we would shift our priorities. If only I could shift my priorities.

In our mother-artist reading group, someone said how depressing it is to live in this time of crisis, austerity, and climate change. We talked about Jacqueline Rose's book *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018). Rose writes, "Because mothers are seen as our point of entry into the world, there is nothing easier than to make social deterioration look like something that is the sacred duty of mothers to prevent" (Rose 27). Blame the mother. Similarly, it's easy to argue that excessive reproduction of children and the growth of population cause climate change. It's easy to side-line our addiction to consumption, fossil fuel dependency, and the unequal distribution of resources. Blame the mother. The mother/reader in our reading group who was complaining, saying the world is too cruel and desperate, had small children. I said, "I felt okay for the future." Weirdly, I felt better, more hopeful. I remembered my teenagers and felt elated. They are embarking upon the world; they are here to change it. I felt fine because they are a new generation that I am in contact with daily. All of them are capable of a new beginning, of freedom. Recalling the work of philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt, Rose writes: "In Arendt's view freedom is identical with the capacity to begin" (79). This sentence gave me a burst of energy in relation to the new generation. This is what I remembered from the book.

Picking up that energy, I better trawl through all the correspondence and create a document. Archive the emails. Clean up. Create something new myself.

Endnotes

1. A place, of their own is an Irish/English art collective, working between art, research and critical spatial practice. It was founded in 2010 by Paula McCloskey, Sam Vardy, and their four children.
2. La ZAD (Zone-to-defend) is located in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France. It is a four-thousand acre commune of wetlands and forests, home to farmers, activists, naturalists, and squatters.

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